

New routes considered to ease I-17 congestion

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The Arizona Republic

Jun. 8, 2007 12:00 AM

As a freeway-widening project gets under way on Interstate 17 in north Phoenix, transportation officials have begun to consider a web of alternative routes north to Flagstaff.

Two could affect Phoenix traffic directly.

One would begin at the junction of Arizona 51 and Loop 101 and head north, passing east of the restricted Agua Fria National Monument. It would end at I-17 near Cordes Junction, the turnoff for Prescott-bound traffic.

Another new highway could be built west of I-17 along the route of the future Loop 303, south of Carefree Highway. It would parallel the freeway up to Arizona 69 and beyond.

An initial report by the Arizona Department of Transportation on the alternate routes will be completed by March 2008.

Any routes could take decades before being built.

They would have to overcome extensive geographic, technical, environmental and political hurdles before it could be built, said Felipe Zubia, a member of the State Transportation Board.

The cost of the new routes isn't even on the radar yet, he added.

I-17 is the only direct route between Phoenix and Flagstaff, and it carries almost all the traffic between the cities. Traffic has overwhelmed the southern end of the freeway and will only get heavier on its northern Arizona stretches.

"The need is clear in regards to the amount of traffic on I-17," said Zubia, a planning consultant for the law firm Beus Gilbert, who represents Maricopa County on the board. "In times of shutdowns because of accidents, snowfall or wildfires, there is virtually no way to leave the freeway."

The freeway is being widened and additional interchanges are being built at the southern end of the route, between Loop 101 and the community of Anthem.

A separate ADOT study is looking at potential improvements for I-17 between Black Canyon City and Cordes Junction. Doug Nintzel, ADOT spokesman, said the study on alternative routes is "very preliminary."

Potential obstacles

He said the key problems that will have to be overcome initially are the area's mountainous terrain and its ownership. Much of the territory is federal land that includes national forests, national monuments and wilderness areas. Only a small part of the land is private property. It is clear, he said, that something will have to happen.

Traffic on I-17 will get heavier as Phoenix and other communities grow, the first part of the study points out. Already, about 25 million vehicles a year pass through the Verde Valley, a potential choke point about 85 miles north of Phoenix.

That compares with close to 30 million vehicles near Flagstaff and more than 200 million in Phoenix.

Growing communities such as Prescott Valley have added to the burden.

Getting public input

The potential route map is just a starting point, ADOT says.

"These potential alternate routes are merely a way to get the study process under way," Nintzel said. "We wanted to have something for people to look at to help fuel the discussion."

ADOT has held four public meetings around the state this month including one Wednesday night in Anthem, and the consensus has been the same: Something has to be done, but it is hard to figure out what.

About 50 Anthem residents attended the meeting. Martha Goad of Anthem said she recognizes the problem.

"There's a very high need for (better access). Exactly what the right proposal is, I don't know," Goad said.

Another resident, David Speranza, said getting to and from his community is difficult every day of the week, even weekends, when people travel.

"You don't go north on Friday or south on Sunday," Speranza said.

Goad agreed, noting, "If there's any little wreck, you can sit on the I-17 for two or three hours without being able to move."

Nintzel said that, by the time a report on the alternative routes is completed by March 2008, many of the alternates will be erased, and others will be moved after detailed analysis is completed.

"There are challenges involved in any alternative," he said.

Additional public meetings will be scheduled in December.

Next spring, the State Transportation Board will determine whether further studies would be undertaken.

Board member Zubia said the board is determined to address the issue.

"I think it is realistic" to expect some kind of relief within 30 years, Zubia said. "The question is: What it will look like? It could be a two-lane road paralleling the freeway, or a system of frontage roads, or another divided highway.

"The challenge will be getting public support."

He said the study is only the beginning.

"The first step," Zubia said, "is to find out if something can be done and whether it has public support."